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FROM USMISSION UNESCO

SENSITIVE

NSC FOR BISA WILLIAMS

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SUBJECT: UNESCO: CARTOON ISSUE THREATENS TO HIJACK UPCOMING
EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETING

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: This is a guidance request, see para 7. On February 15 the UNESCO Ambassadors of the Member States of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) released a statement in response to the Danish cartoons. Among other things, the statement calls for the creation of a normative instrument by UNESCO against the defamation of religious symbols and "Islamaphobia." In subsequent conversations with members of the OIC, it has become clear that most OIC members, with the exception of Libya and Saudi Arabia, are backing away from a normative instrument and would rather introduce a draft resolution at the next Executive Board (EB) calling for discussion of this topic in order to achieve broad-based support. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) In recent days, the OIC statement has been the prime topic of discussion at UNESCO. Judging from reports of how often this issue has been raised in other multilateral fora, it may be that the OIC is looking for a favorable venue within the UN system to push this agenda and is probing UNESCO. We are told that a senior OIC official from Geneva traveled to UNESCO to meet with the OIC ambassadors there.

13. (SBU) Ambassador Oliver was told by the Omani ambassador (also president of the General Conference) that he was trying to calm down the more radical members and prevent them from going too fast. His views were echoed by the Qatari, Yemeni and Lebanese ambassadors who all indicated that the original statement went too far but felt the item should be on the EB agenda for discussion.

14. (SBU) The Turkish ambassador (the vice chair of the OIC at UNESCO) also indicated that he disagreed with the tone and would work to slow things down. The Afghan ambassador expressed concern that the issue be dealt with before extremists take over the agenda. He felt that is important for UNESCO to get out in front of this issue.

15. (SBU) During the week of February 20, OIC members engaged in lengthy negotiations with the EU troika plus the UK to arrive at a title for the proposed draft resolution, "Respect for freedom of expression and respect for beliefs, sacred values and religious and cultural symbols." As of this point the contents of the resolution have not been forthcoming, despite numerous promises to share them with the U.S. delegation.

16. (SBU) According to EU contacts, the Austrian president, who previously served in Riyadh, is over-enthusiastic about working with the OIC and is "an apologist for the Saudis." He has at time been ahead of the agreed EU position at UNESCO, to support no legal instruments in this area-whether hard or soft law. The Canadians tell us they are awaiting instructions but are likely to shy away from any instruments either.

17. (SBU) Comment and guidance request: The OIC members seem to have realized too late that they have opened a can of worms that may be hard to close. We have made it clear in all our conversations that the U.S. would not support any kind of normative instrument. In this we are joined by the EU. We are also concerned about another idea being floated-the organization by UNESCO of a conference on this topic. We feel that a conference organized by the secretariat would not necessarily produce the desired

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results. What we think may be the best outcome would be a consensus resolution along the lines of what is already done at each Executive Board session when discussing Middle East issues and Palestine. (This possibility has come up in several conversations.) That resolution is negotiated privately and brought to a vote without further discussion. Such a resolution would be most effective if it focused on existing UNESCO programs for tolerance education and intercultural dialogue. Please advise stance Mission should adopt

as this discussion continues.
Oliver